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PERSIAN FOLKLORE.

BY ELLA C. SYKES, AUTHOR OF *Through Persia on a Side-saddle*, AND
The Story-book of the Shah.

(*Read at Meeting of 17th April, 1901.*)

I MAKE no pretensions to possess any special knowledge of this interesting subject. My only claim on your attention is that, during a residence of over two years in Persia, I collected various items of folklore, which may perhaps be new to some of those present.

Strabo says: "Man is eager after knowledge, and the love of legend is but the prelude thereto. This is why children begin to listen (to fables) and are acquainted with them before any other kind of knowledge." Persians of all ranks are like children in their love of stories. From the Shah downwards they listen with delight to the public story-tellers, most of whom belong to the order of dervishes, and make the round of the country, always drawing small crowds in every town.

Some eight hundred years ago the poet Firdusi collected all the old legends referring to the rise of the Persian nation, and made from them a fine epic poem, entitled the *Shah Nameh*, or *Book of Kings*. The principal character, however, is not a king, but a hero, the mighty Rustum, who is the Hercules of Persia, and whose wondrous exploits rival those of that illustrious Grecian hero. So much a part of the national tradition is Rustum, that a specially strong man, if referred to in conversation, would be at once compared to him, and all over the north of Persia, the scene of his exploits, villages named Rustumabad frequently occur.

Scarcely less celebrated is Sohrab, Rustum's ill-fated son; and the fine passage in Firdusi, where the champion of the world, unwitting of the relationship, kills his own child in single combat, is well known by every Persian possessing any claim to culture. Time fails to tell of Prince

Isfundiyar, whose deeds of valour equalled those of Rustum, with whom he had a celebrated fight, lasting two days. The old champion, now aged some hundreds of years, was pressed so hard by his youthful opponent, that he was obliged to have recourse to the aid of the Simurgh, a creature half-bird, half-beast, before he could vanquish the prince.

It is but a step from these legends to the *ghouls*, *divs*, *jinns*, and *afreets*, in which all Persians, even those who are well educated, have a firm belief.

The *Ghoul* haunts lonely places, and its aim is to lure travellers from their path and then devour them. Its real form is monstrous beyond words, and it indulges in blood-curdling yells and shrieks; but it has the power of assuming any shape it pleases, and often appears in the guise of a camel or mule, or even in that of its intended victim's relatives or friends. Both Rustum and Isfundiyar had repeated combats with these appalling creatures, which now specially haunt the "Valley of the Angel of Death," not far from Koom. They are supposed to be the attendants of Azrael, or Death, and feast on the departed. Persians say that a true believer, who utters the name of the Prophet in all sincerity, can never be harmed by a ghoul; but all the same, no one will run the risk of going into a graveyard or of wandering among ruins if he can possibly avoid it. A Persian gentleman of my acquaintance confessed to being afraid of these horrible chimeras, but said that in my company he would venture into the most deserted ruin, because he knew that no ghoul would appear were an European present. The reason he gave was that these Persian bogies only revealed themselves to those who believed in them.

Divs or Demons are supposed to take the form of cat-headed men with horns and hoofs, and the hero Rustum's most celebrated exploit was the slaying of the great White Demon which lived in a cave on Mount Demavend. No

Persian will, if possible, sleep alone at night, rich men usually hiring a *mollah*, or priest, to share their bedroom, because they fear the demons, which have added powers during the darkness. For the same reason Persians will not eat anything cooked on the previous day, giving as their reason that a demon may have looked at it during the night.

Finns and *Afreets* appear to be spirits of lesser power. They can turn themselves into animals at will, and it is on account of this that no Persian likes to kill dogs or cats, lest, being forcibly ousted from their dwelling-places, the angry demons may haunt those who have evicted them. For example, our house in the south of Persia was infested with cats, many of which my brother shot. A black one, however, eluded all his efforts, and our servants implored him not to try and kill it, as they insisted that it was really a jinn, which would do us all much injury if we molested it. The cat, however, at last fell a victim to the gun, and, as no catastrophe occurred, our servants took heart again. If a Persian is seized with an epileptic fit, his illness is laid at the door of the jinns, who are supposed to be beating the sufferer. On some of the plains round Kerman, the wind blows the sand into high columns, which whirl round and round with great swiftness, and these the Persians call jinns. They say that if a *mollah*, or priest, writes his good deeds on a piece of paper, and throws it into one of these whirls, that it will be transmuted into gold.

Persians believe much in *dreams*, the taking of "*fals*" or *lots*, *lucky and unlucky days*, *charms*, *witchcraft*, and so on. Herodotus gives an account of how Xerxes was persuaded to undertake the invasion of Greece owing to a dream twice repeated, and at the present day any Persian visited by a remarkable dream betakes himself at once to the astrologers in order that they may elucidate it.

The method of taking *fals*, or *lots*, reminds us of the *sortes Vigilianæ*. The dervish, after an invocation to

Allah, pushes a knife between the pages of a volume of Hafiz, and then, opening it, reads the passage at the top of the right-hand page, and the inquirer shapes his course accordingly.

Nothing serious is ever done in Persia without consulting an astrologer. No one will close a bargain, start on a journey, enter a city or house for the first time, or even take medicine, unless the astrologer assures them that the omens are favourable. This characteristic is noted by Herodotus, when he mentions that Mardonius and his Persians refused to attack the Greeks at Plataea, because the omens were not propitious.

This belief in omens leads us on to the subject of lucky and unlucky days. The thirteenth of the month of Saffar (our April) is a day of evil-omen. All Persians, men and women alike, leave their houses on this day, and spend the hours between sunrise and sunset in the open air, in order to avert the harm which would probably overtake them were they to stay indoors. They are, moreover, most careful not to quarrel with anyone during these hours, as if they give way to passion disaster is sure to follow.

On the last Wednesday of this month of Saffar, the Day of Judgment is supposed to be going to occur, and, in consequence, all Wednesdays are unlucky days. The month has, in part, gained its evil reputation from the fact that Mahomet died during Saffar.¹ Friday also, the equivalent of our Sunday, the day on which every good Persian repairs to the public bath and then to the Mosque for his devotions, is unlucky, and no one would undertake a journey upon it. Curiously enough, although thirteen is an unlucky number in Persia (perhaps, together with the Friday super-

¹ *Postscript.* On the last Wednesday of the month of Saffar, in every house a fire is lit, over which boys and girls jump, in turn or together, because they have come to the end of the unlucky month of Saffar. My informant thinks this must be originally derived from an old Parsee custom, because it is not known in Arabia, and therefore is probably not Mohammedan.

stition, being adopted from the Christians by the Arabs¹), yet the 13th, 14th, and 15th of all months (except that of Saffar) are supposed to be lucky or *white*, in contradiction to unlucky or *black* days.

In the ordinary course of events a day is fortunate or the reverse, according to whose face a Persian has looked upon the first thing after waking. The "lucky" face or its contrary can only be learnt by experience, but such people as public executioners and their children are always credited with unlucky visages, as they are considered to possess "black" hearts.

It is also advisable when seeing the new moon for the first time to glance at a "fortunate" face.

It is lucky to be the first to enter a new building, and the Shah has been known to give audience on some important matter in a newly-erected pavilion, in order that the business on hand might progress satisfactorily.

On going on a journey it is well to leave the house with the face turned towards the door, in order to ensure a safe return. It is also unlucky to send a letter unless one of its corners is cut off.

Swallows are supposed to bring luck, and the Persians put up perches for them in their houses. Owls, on the other hand, are considered to bring disaster to a house. When living at Kerman, S.E. Persia, I was anxious to have as a pet a lovely little owl. Our servants, however, went in a body to the Persian secretary and begged him to ask me not to do so, as the bird would be sure to bring evil to the consulate. The crowing of a cock is fortunate, or the reverse, according to the hour. The lucky times are noon, midnight, and nine o'clock in the morning or at night, and the superstitious sometimes kill a cock if it refuses to restrict its crowing to those hours!

¹ *Postscript.* I am told that the Mohammedans have derived the idea of the unluckiness of thirteen from the ancient Parsees, with whom the thirteenth of every month was a day of evil omen.

It is a usual custom to slay a goat in order to ensure prosperity to any personage on entering a town. On the approach of the traveller, the goat is killed in the middle of the road, then its head is placed on one side and its body on the other, the man thus honoured riding between the different parts of the animal and across its blood. Sometimes sweetmeats are thrown under the hoofs of the rider's horse for the same purpose. Morier mentions that in travelling through a disturbed part of Persia his muleteer happened to kill a snake. The man cut it in half, and throwing the two parts on different sides of the road, he explained to his master that this act would save them from any marauding band that might be on their track.¹

It is unlucky to commence walking with the left foot, or for a gazelle to cross on the left of a rider, and all Persian women consider that disaster is sure to overtake them if they start off on a journey without giving some money to the poor. Once my horse, shying, was within an ace of precipitating us both into the moat round Kerman, and a Persian gentleman with our party told me that the incident was owing to my lack of charity as we started. A way of ensuring a successful journey, which is common to both Persians and Parsees, is to show a mirror to the traveller, and at the same time to offer him a glass of water on which floats the head of a flower, or to burn certain herbs before him. During our journeys in Persia my brother and I have been speeded on our way in this manner two or three times both by Parsees and by Persians. My little Parsee maid also used often to wave the smoke of a burning herb before me when we left one camp to go to another. She would assure me that this ceremony would guarantee me against all kinds of accidents.

To sneeze *once* when starting on any expedition is an evil omen, and as far as I could make out it is equally unlucky whether the traveller himself or anyone else per-

¹ Morier, *A Journey through Persia in 1808 and 1809*, p. 316.

petrates the sneeze. Persians in such a case will stare hard at the sun in order to induce a second or third sneeze. If they are unsuccessful in doing this, they can betake themselves to repeating a certain invocation to Allah; but most Persians will give up the expedition, believing firmly that it can only end in disaster. Curiously enough, however, Persians believe, on the other hand, that if they are desiring anything ardently, and someone sneezes at that moment, that their wish is sure to be granted. My brother's Persian secretary always attributed a bad accident to the fact that someone had sneezed just as he was mounting his horse. As his companions were Englishmen, he felt ashamed to decline the ride, but the sequels of a bolting horse and a broken arm made him chary about giving up his superstitions from that time. He also assured me that he owed the schooling he had had in England to the fact that when, as quite a child, he was wishing to go to that country, someone had sneezed. On investigation, I found that a lapse of several years had occurred between this lucky sneeze and its consummation, and I pointed out this fact to him. It made no difference, however, in his belief in that particular sneeze.

It is unlucky to name a horse after a Persian, as if any evil befalls the animal, the same injury will overtake the man after whom it is called. This fact was brought home to me in a curious way. We had bought a horse from a Persian gentleman, and had, in ignorance of this superstition, called it after its former owner. When I met this latter after a lapse of some two years, I was struck by his eager inquiries as to the health of this horse, and at last elicited the real reason of this unusual interest.

If any accident occurs to a rider, his horse being hurt but he himself escaping unscathed, the Persians say, "The horse has become a sacrifice," meaning that the injury meant for the rider has descended on his steed. During our travels in Baluchistan an incident of this kind happened to

my brother, and the horse which he was riding was killed. As the animal was a great pet with us both I felt the loss keenly, greatly to the surprise of our servants, who considered that I ought to have rejoiced, as the horse had averted the evil intended for my brother.

Throughout Persia there is a very strong belief in the *Evil Eye*. Every European on entering the country is warned never to admire anything belonging to a Persian without using the expression "Mashallah" (God is great) to avert it. If this be omitted harm is sure to follow.

Rich Persians frequently dress their children in shabby clothes in order to avert the Evil Eye. A friend of mine once took her children by invitation to visit a Persian lady of rank in Tehran who had one small son. The child did not make its appearance for a considerable time, and then was carried into the room dressed in clothes no better than would be worn by a peasant's baby. This was because the mother feared that the European lady might admire her son and so bring illness upon him. A few days after this my friend's Persian nurse came to her in great agitation, saying that some Europeans had admired one of her charges and had omitted to say "Mashallah." Oddly enough the child fell ill the next day, proving to the satisfaction of the nurse that the evil eye had been cast upon it.

Old hags are popularly credited with this unpleasant power, and no superstitious Persian will look at one if he can avoid it.

Blue is the favourite colour to ward off the Evil Eye, and camels, horses, and mules have beads fastened on their tails, or even wear blue necklaces in the case of highly valued animals. Children frequently wear a sheep's eye brought by a pilgrim from Mecca who has been there on the day of the great holocaust of sheep. A turquoise is stuck into this eye, and the whole, put into an amulet-case, is sewn on to the child's cap. Another powerful charm is a verse from the Koran, placed in the *bazu-band* or amulet-box, which is

then bound on the fore-arm. A metal hand with one finger extended is also used for the same purpose. A wild pig kept in the stables is supposed to keep the evil eye off the horses, who seem to be peculiarly liable to this malign influence. A groom who broke the knees of one of our horses was sharply reprimanded by my brother for his careless riding. He answered promptly that the accident was no fault of his, because a man had admired the horse, and as he did not add the word "Mashallah" it was not surprising that the animal came to harm. This is only one of dozens of examples that came under my notice, showing the deeply-seated belief in the evil eye.

Curiously enough, a stable constitutes *bast* or sanctuary in Persia. While living at Kerman, we frequently found some refugee or other in our stable, come to implore my brother's good offices with the Governor. On one occasion, when we were in Baluchistan, the Governor of the province threatened to bastinado his soldiers for misconduct. We were in camp at the time and our horses were tethered in a grove of palm-trees. To my amusement the soldiers repaired in a body to this grove, and refused to move from among our horses until the Governor promised to overlook their offence.

While on the subject of sanctuary, I may mention that every shrine has this privilege, and in most Persian towns there are quarters in which any malefactor is safe, notably at the sacred city of Koom. To hold on to the English flag-staff, or to grasp the coat of any great personage, also confers sanctuary.¹

¹ [SANCTUARY. "Among Bedouin tribes there is an ancient law called the law of 'dakhal.' An escaped prisoner, or a man in danger of being captured by an enemy, may by this law claim refuge in the tent of an Arab, even in the encampment of an opposing tribe. The refugee enters the tent, takes hold of the robe of the occupant, and exclaims: 'Ya dakhaliék,' and thus becomes a 'dakhiel,' or protégé. A true Arab will defend his 'dakhiel' with his life. The law of 'dakhal' is, however, only in full force among those tribes who are, by their strength or geographical position, independent of the Turkish Government. Among tribes in which the law is maintained a

Medicine in Persia is more or less a question of charms. A hot disease requires a cold remedy, and vice versâ. The advice of the astrologers is always taken as to summoning the doctor, and they are again consulted before his medicine be swallowed. The doctor's principal stock-in-trade is a brass bowl with the signs of the Zodiac and texts of the Koran engraved outside. The inner surface is incised with a mass of short prayers—a prayer for each disease. To each prayer belongs a small key with the name of the disease. The method of procedure is simple in the extreme. The doctor fills the bowl with water, makes a feint of unlocking with one of the keys the prayer alluding to his patient's disease, and tells the sick man to swallow the water. If this be done in a believing spirit, a cure is sure to follow.

Here is another example of a faith-cure. A European lady-doctor was asked by a Persian patient for a token in order that she might be admitted to her presence. For lack of anything better the lady-doctor gave a safety-pin, but her patient did not appear at the appointed time. Shortly after, however, the token was returned with thanks, the patient alleging that she had been cured by drinking the water in which she had placed the safety-pin.

Many other remedies are resorted to. If anyone is at the point of death, a pearl ground up will act as a powerful restorative, while powdered rubies and emeralds are

man who proved false to his dakhil would be disgraced for life. The expression 'Ya dakhaliëk,' is used by town Arabs as a term of endearment, implying perfect reliance and trust."—M. E. ROGERS, *Domestic Life in Palestine*, p. 391 (published by Bell and Daldy in 1862, and probably long since out of print). Miss Rogers, the sister of the well-known "Rogers Bey" (Mr. E. T. Rogers, H.B.M. Consular Service), had unusual opportunities of observing Palestinian life and manners. In the preceding pages she describes how the young sons of an Arab chieftain of Djebel Nablous, who had been worsted in a local strife in which the Turkish authorities took sides with the opposite party, sought her protection at the British Vice-Consulate at Haifa, clinging piteously to her skirts with cries of "Ya dakhaliëk!" and entreaties to be kept from falling into the hands of the Turkish Governor. C. S. BURNE.]

administered as tonics, and to sew a patient up in a raw hide is another remedy. If a person is badly burnt, the wounds are sometimes smeared over with soot from the bottom of the cooking vessels, and to drink quantities of pomegranate juice is another cure for the same thing.

A child suffering from water on the brain was brought to a Persian doctor, who assured the parents that it was possessed by a demon. He advised them to lay it in a newly-dug grave during the night, saying that in the morning it would either be cured or the demon would have made away with it. The parents followed the prescription faithfully, and their surprise was great to find their child next morning sleeping soundly in its strange cradle, neither better nor worse.

When the child of one of my friends was very ill, the servants implored her to allow them to try a charm in order to cure it. They mixed grease and charcoal, with which they made crosses on the child's forehead, the palms of its hands, and the soles of its feet. Then one of them took a roasted egg, and holding it in his two hands, raised them towards heaven, invoking at the same time the names of all the people whom he especially loved and respected.

Another charm used when a Persian is ill, and his disease does not yield to the remedies of the doctor, is to bring eggs into his room and plaster them over with mud, calling each by the name of some possible enemy. The eggs are then baked on the hearth, and the one that cracks first tells which enemy it is that has bewitched him. To escape from his power, the egg must be thrown into running water at a cross-road if possible.

Another method used to cure a sick man supposed to be bewitched, is for his wife to beg for fragments of food from all his acquaintances. This she does in the belief that if her husband can eat of the food of his enemy he will be cured. She makes a kind of porridge of all the pieces that

she has collected, and when the sick man has swallowed it he is supposed to recover.

One of our Persian servants, whom we had taken with us from the capital to Kerman, became very queer in his behaviour, and one day he took French-leave, and made his way back to his home, some six hundred miles away. The other servants were at no loss for an explanation of his conduct. They said immediately that his wife at Tehran had bewitched him in order to get him home again.

Near Kerman a small stream trickled out of a well of rock. Popular superstition ascribed this to a blow from the hand of Ali, and women desiring to become mothers would drink the water and hang candles and rags on the bushes near, in order to attract the notice of the saint. Not far from this was a cave in which sick women put food. If this were eaten during the night, it was a sign that the *Peri-banou* or queen of the fairies would cure them.

Some families possess a stone as an antidote against scorpion and tarantula bites. They say it is formed of the hardened tears of a certain Persian prince, who was turned by enchantment into an ibex, and wandered among the mountains, eternally bewailing his cruel fate.

Throughout Baluchistan are *ziarats*, or shrines, consisting of small enclosures of rough stones. In the middle of these is always a heap of boulders, among which sticks fluttering with rags are placed. These rags are pieces of the garments of devotees, who imagine that in this way they are calling the attention of the holy man who is buried there, and who will cure their complaints and intercede for them with Allah. Often fine ibex or moufflon horns are placed on the stones to do honour to the saint, and usually there are camel-bells, presumably to attract his attention.

As these shrines are extremely common in Baluchistan, I used to wonder what qualities went to make a saint, and was interested when at a place called Manish to find that the

late Governor was buried under a huge cairn of stones with the usual accompaniments of fluttering rags and ibex horns. The Baluchis informed us that this man's claim to saintship consisted in the fact that he had never robbed the poor. From an Oriental point of view, the man who has it in his power to oppress and to amass money as a result of his oppressions, and refrains from doing so, is worthy of every possible honour. The natives themselves were often not very clear as to the saintly personages buried beneath the innumerable cairns of stones. In reading Mr. Floyer's book, *Unexplored Baluchistan*, I noticed that he says (p. 39) that he sometimes started a *ziarat* or shrine himself by collecting together a small heap of stones as he walked on ahead of his caravan. His camel-drivers, when they came up to the spot, imagined that this must be the grave of some dervish, and at once cast their quota of boulders on the cairn.

Occasionally I noticed a shrine walled round with upright slabs of a sort of shale, on which were scratched animals and figures; a proceeding quite contrary to the tenets of Mohammedanism, which does not allow anything human or animal to be depicted.

In some *ziarats* the head and feet of the saint were marked by slate monoliths, and these were often placed several yards apart; the idea being, I believe, to give an impression in this way of the grandeur of the departed.

Often I observed large round places swept clean of the black shingle and formed into a circle with low upright stones, a small pile of stones being left in the centre. Dr. Bellew, in his book *From the Indus to the Tigris*, says (p. 54) they are called *chaps*, a word meaning "clapping of hands," and that on the occasions of weddings the Baluchis dance here, keeping time to the music by clapping their hands, and the musicians take up their position on the stones. The explanation, however, given to me about these places was, that they were used as points for the people to

assemble and hear parts of the *tazieh* or passion play recited, the dervish who conducted these religious exercises sitting in the centre. Perhaps both explanations are right.

The folklore of places is interesting. For example, the fort of Aibi in Baluchistan had a stuffed dummy warrior always hanging over the parapet. We were informed that the figure had been placed there by a dervish, who had assured the Baluchis that by this means their castle was rendered impregnable.

The volcano Demavend in the Elburz Range is the scene of many of the Persian legends, and was the home of demons and genii, besides being the resting place of the blessed on their way to paradise.

Kuh-i-Shah, or "The Mountain of the Saint," in S.E. Persia, a peak 13,700 feet in height, is dedicated to a holy man who is supposed to cause explosions in the mountain during the summer months. Whether these explosions take place or not I am unable to say, but my brother's huntsmen firmly believed in them. My brother and I ascended this mountain in July, 1895, and found a heap of stones at the summit, on which was laid a large collection of coins, beads, brass rings, and, odd to relate, a Queen Victoria token. As the mountain was not a volcano there was nothing to account for the theory of these supposed explosions.

Kuh-i-Chehel-Tun or "The Mountain of the Forty Beings," in Baluchistan, is supposed to be haunted by forty children, turned by enchantment into goats, which ceaselessly fling down stones on all who dare to climb their fastnesses.

We will now turn to the subject of *Games*.

1. A ball is hit into the air with a gaudily-painted stick. Whoever catches it calls out *Goal geriftun*, a corruption of *Gul geriftun* (I have taken the flower.) Who misses is pelted.

2. A row of walnuts are put on a ridge and knocked off by another walnut thrown at four to five yards' distance.

3. A chain gathered up in the hand is thrown out so as to touch another player.

4. An oblong is drawn with divisions, and stones are kicked into them, each division counting so much.

5. The *Fereed*, in which horsemen throw javelins at one another; the men aimed at, ducking to avoid the missile.

6. The *Doghela-Bazi* (throwing game) is played on horseback. The players fling a stick on the ground with great force and catch it up as it rebounds.

7. A lemon is thrown into the air and then fired at from horseback.

8. An egg placed on a little mound of sand is fired at by horsemen passing it at full gallop.

9. Chess, a kind of draughts, pitch and toss, marbles (played with pebbles), and a species of rounders and fives, are all known in Persia, as well as card-games.

10. My brother, Major Sykes, has had some success in reviving *polo*, which is said to have had its origin in Persia. In the *Shah Nameh* is an account of a game played by the Persian hero, Siawush, before Afrasiyab, King of Tartary. My brother has sent home copies of old tiles on which the game is depicted in a spirited manner. The originals are about the date of Shah Abbas, and the king is introduced as watching the game.

No rûz, the Persian New Year's Day, which takes place about March 21st, as the sun passes into Aries, is a day of general rejoicing, marking the end of winter and the beginning of spring. It is a festival dating from remote antiquity, and has nothing to do with Mohammedanism. Every Persian dons new clothes, all servants being given new costumes by their masters. There is a feast in every house, and among the food are dishes of springing barley and lighted candles. On this day the Shah shows himself to his subjects, gives *Kalats* or robes of honour, and distributes largess; while ceremonious visits of congratulation are paid to him and to his representatives in all the

cities in Persia. Persians have a superstition that whatever a man is doing on this day, he will be fated to do the same thing throughout the whole year; therefore they are always anxious not to be travelling at *No rûz*, not wishing to be unsettled for a twelvemonth. At this season, according to Dr. Wills,¹ the dervishes or professional beggars erect tents before the houses of prominent personages, make a pretence of a garden by sticking twigs in the ground, and then blow a cow's horn incessantly with the cry "Ya huc!" (my right). They refuse to leave until they have been given a good present of money.

A Persian bride is given a piece of gold for luck. She carries bread and salt into her husband's house to ensure plenty, and kisses her father's hearth as she leaves her old home.

The Shah has the right to see every woman in his kingdom unveiled, and the royal glance is believed to bring good luck to those on whom it is cast.

I will now say a few words about the *Gabres* or Fire-Worshippers, commonly called Parsees by Europeans, the word Parsee or *Farsi* merely meaning *Persian*. These are the descendants of the old inhabitants of the land, who clung to their faith when Persia was overrun by the conquering Arabs. They are to be found at Tehran, but are principally at Yezd and Kerman, and also in the villages near these latter cities, and of course at Bombay. They are looked down upon by the Persians, who will not allow them to ride through the towns, and restrict the townsmen to ugly mustards and browns in their costumes, not allowing them to wear the flowing Persian *abba* or cloak. The peasants wear curious helmet-shaped felt caps. Moreover the Gabres are restricted as to what trade they may follow, and in consequence the race has taken to agriculture, all the best gardeners in Persia being fire-worshippers. The women go about with their faces uncovered, and have a

¹ Dr. Wills, *In the Land of the Lion and the Sun*, p. 46.

picturesque dress composed of a gay chintz jacket, full trousers which are embroidered in many coloured stripes, and half a dozen wraps for the head ; the fifth consisting of a white veil falling in graceful folds down the back, but not concealing the face, and the last being a large checked cotton sheet worn over the head and wrapt round the body for out-door use. Little Gabre girls wear a small coif, and the hair falls from it in long plaits, but the women would look upon it as immodest to allow anyone to see their head without its coverings.

The Gabres, as is well known, follow the tenets of Zoroaster, and have the Zendavesta as their Sacred Book. They believe in Ormuzd, the Good Spirit, and in Ahriman, the Principle of Evil, and worship fire as a deity. At the city of Yezd is the chief temple of the fire worshippers, who believe that the flame which burns on the altar there has never been extinguished through the centuries. When Gabres settle in any other part of Persia they always get some of the sacred fire from Yezd to place in their temples. The priests who attend to this fire wear a veil over their mouths in order not to pollute the holy flame with their breath, and it is on account of this that no Gabre will blow out a flame. My little Parsee maid always extinguished a candle with her fingers when she entered my service.¹

The Gabre men wear a threefold cord round their waists, signifying good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. This they untie and retie five times daily at the hours of prayer.

They reverence the dog, which in the Zendavesta is the special animal of Ormuzd, and a dog is often called in to decide whether a man be dead or not. If it eats the bread laid on the breast of the supposed corpse, life is extinct, but if it refuses the food there is still hope.

¹ The Shah's band plays at sunset every day at Tehran, and this performance is supposed to be a Zoroastrian custom, surviving from the times when the sun was worshipped.

Herodotus says that the corpse of every male Persian had to be torn by a dog or by a beast of prey. At the present day the dead are exposed on towers to be eaten by vultures and crows. If the birds pick out the right eye of a corpse first, it is a sign that the soul has gone to the Zoroastrian Paradise. If, however, the left eye is attacked first, the fate of the departed soul is a gloomy one.¹

There is considered to be such defilement in touching a corpse, that a special class of Parsees do all the burying, and even relatives will not assist a man if they think he may breathe his last while they are touching him.

Close to the *Dakhma*, or Tower of Silence, at Kerman, in S.E. Persia, was a house with unglazed windows. The relatives of deceased Gabres were in the habit of setting out a substantial meal in the upper room of this house, affirming that the spirit, just after its separation from the body, was greatly in need of nourishment.

The Parsees never wash anything on a Tuesday, saying that no article can be cleansed on that day.

My Parsee maid used to hang a small white shell on any possession that she was afraid of losing, affirming that it was an infallible charm.

I have selected a few *Proverbs and Saws* which are characteristic of the country.

Here is a beggar's refrain :—

“Khoda guft, ‘bidde,’
Shaitan guft, ‘nidde.’”

It means, “God says ‘give,’ but Satan says, ‘Don’t give.’”

“Stretch your legs no further than your carpet,” is equivalent to our “Cut your coat according to your cloth.”

¹ [At the end of the 17th century, it was the custom in Kebraboth, a suburb of Ispahan, to let a cock out of the house in which the dead body lay. If it was caught and carried off by a fox, it was believed that the deceased person would be happy in the next life. If this test failed, or was ambiguous in its issue, the corpse was decorated and hung up on the wall of the cemetery with wooden forks for the test related by Miss Sykes. (Olearius, *Persianische Reisebeschreibung*, p. 295.) N. W. THOMAS.]

"The jackal dipped himself in indigo, and then thought he was a peacock," explains itself.

"This camel is at your gate," is the same as "This sin is laid at your door."

"When you are in a room be of the same colour as the people in it," is the Persian for "Do at Rome as the Romans do."

"The swiftest horse is apt to stumble," is "More haste worse speed," and our familiar proverb, "Don't look a gift-horse in the mouth," is found also in Persia.

"A cut string may be joined again, but the knot always remains," is used in speaking of a broken friendship.

"Only a Mazanderani dog can catch a Mazanderani fox," is the equivalent to our "Set a thief to catch a thief."

"Often to be kind to the tiger is to be cruel to the lamb," seems to have no equivalent.

"If you have a fine horse it becomes a gift, or *pishkash*." This proverb alludes to the way in which princes and those in authority despoil those under them.

"A Persian receiving a *toman* (a coin worth about four shillings) at once buys a led horse," is a saying satirizing the national love of *tashakhus* or show.

"Our fathers never saw this even in a dream," is a common expression denoting astonishment.

"All pains can be forgotten in forty days, but the pain of being deprived of food lasts forty years."

"A fool said, 'My father was vizier to the Sultan,' and I answered, 'What is that to you?'" This is a Persian way of snubbing anyone who may boast of his ancestry.

"War at the outset is good if it ends in peace," is the Persian manner of saying that it is good to begin a friendship with a little aversion.

"Man is the slave of his benefactor."

"The innocent man may go to the foot of the scaffold, but he will never ascend it."

"If you become rich and your head is not turned, you are a man."

"New sleeves get a good dinner." This proverb alludes to the story that a shabbily-dressed *mollah* was turned away from a feast. On returning in a new coat he was given the place of honour at the entertainment, and repeated the saying at intervals during the evening in a bewildered manner.

THE ANCIENT AND MODERN GAME OF ASTRAGALS.

BY E. LOVETT.

(*Read at Meeting of 17th April, 1901.*)

A FEW years ago, during a visit to Holland and Belgium, I noticed in the poorer parts of some of the towns children playing a game upon doorsteps with small metal objects, which upon investigation proved to be white metal copies of the Astragalus or knuckle-bone. I soon found some of these for sale in the toy shops, where I purchased them at prices ranging from three a penny to about a penny each.

They were of great interest to me, as they seemed to be a direct descendant of the bronze Astragali of the Roman period, and they prompted me to collect a few notes and specimens to illustrate the devolution and differentiation of this very ancient game.

The game of Astragals, so called because it was played with the Astragalus or knuckle-bone of an animal, usually a sheep, is of great antiquity. A beautiful group (one of the Tanagra terra-cottas) in the British Museum, representing two girls playing the game, is recorded as B.C. 800, and a marble figure of an astragalus player, life-size, of later date,